

**THE FORESTRY COMMISSION ENGLAND EXECUTIVE BOARD**  
**MINUTES OF THE 100TH MEETING**  
**Conference Room, National Office, Bristol**  
**27April 2015**

**Attendees:**

Ian Gambles  
Simon Hodgson  
Steve Meeks  
Richard Greenhous  
Sarah England  
Richard Barker  
Richard Britton  
Mike Seddon  
Mark Funnell

Josh Roberts – Minute Secretary

**1. Welcome**

Ian Gambles opened the meeting.

**2. Minutes and Actions**

The minutes of the meeting on 21 February were reviewed and agreed.

Mark Funnell reported to the Board that the best opportunity to communicate around the results of the Health and Safety Climate Tool survey would occur later in the year. He confirmed to the Board that plans were in place for when the time was right.

Mark Funnell reported that his action to work with business colleagues to ensure that Forestry Commission England complied with Cabinet Office purdah guidance had been completed.

**3. Finance report**

Steve Meeks updated the Board on the financial position as at the end of the financial year 2014–15.

The overall financial position at the end of 2014/15 was stable. The provisional outturn for 2014/15 indicates a creditable minor £480k (1.2%) underspend on Resource DEL which will provide a 'buffer' for unanticipated pressures arising from external audit.

Although the 2015/16 budget is in place, the possibility of in-year adjustments following the election of a new government in May was noted.

An underspend on the Rural Development Programme for England by £3 million was reported. Richard Greenhous explained that in previous years Forest Services had experienced high surges in demand towards the end of the financial year but that this had not been repeated this year, possibly due to the change in the grant scheme, which had also meant that the option to bring schemes forward had not been available.

Steve Meeks confirmed that the budget for 2015/16 was in place and had been endorsed by the England National Committee. He reported good progress was being maintained on the production of the 2014/15 Annual Report and Accounts which was on track to meet the key deadlines for laying and publishing. Recognition was given to the risk posed by the forthcoming election due to uncertainties around clearance and possible last minute narrative changes.

#### **4. Woodland Policy Enabling Programme Business cases**

Ian Gambles provided the Board with an overview of the Forestry Commission England position within a cross-border context and the changes which were occurring in Scotland through the turnover of senior executive positions.

First drafts of the businesses cases for the devolution of central services to England were due to be completed on 13 May 2015. Ian Gambles proposed focusing on the first drafts of these businesses cases at the next England Executive Board meeting on 1 June. The Board should agree the recommended approach to implementing options from the business cases during the June meeting.

Ian Gambles provided context for the project short term, including the timeline for opportunities to work with cross-border colleagues. He also raised the possibility of needing external project management capacity to deliver the changes required.

**ACTION: Richard Barker to ensure devolution business cases were tabled for consideration at the 1 June EEB**

#### **5. Quarterly communications report**

Mark Funnell led the Board through the presentation highlighting some of the key topics which were generating media attention, such as Forest Live, wildlife management and pests and diseases.

Simon Hodgson suggested that the report should be structured so that it reported more clearly on the triple bottom line and that doing this might highlight the need for generating more communication in strategic areas. Mark Funnell agreed to take Simon Hodgson's comments into consideration.

Sarah England brought to the Board's attention the adverse reaction of Forestry Commission England staff to the lack of reference to the Forestry Commission in a recent episode of Countryfile focused on woodland. This had been because of Purdah. Mark Funnell agreed to consider how staff could be informed of this.

Mike Seddon brought to the Board's attention work to make Forest Plans available online. He discussed the benefits this would provide in openly communicating the scheduled programmes of work for Forest Enterprise. Richard Barker explained how this step would improve the organisation's ability to respond to information requests by increasing transparency and reducing the burden on the secretariat team. Mike Seddon highlighted the challenges of providing online maps for forest plans, including the limitations of Google maps. Mark Funnell agreed to look into resolving these issues.

Richard Greenhous welcomed the improved data reporting in the new communication reports but asked if they could be provided with either visual representation or commentary against expectations or benchmarks. Mark Funnell agreed to look into developing the suggestion as a feature of the report.

**ACTIONS: Mark Funnell to: (1) revise presentation of quarterly report to reflect comments from Simon Hodgson and Richard Greenhous; (2) discuss with Mike Seddon how to address online map issues with making Forest Plans available online; (3) to communicate to staff the reasons for the FC's absence from the recent Countryfile programme on forestry**

## **6. Communications Capability Review**

Mark Funnell informed the board of the review currently underway for communications across the Defra network. The review was being led by Cabinet Office and involved brief interviews with key staff on their experience and perceptions of communication capability across Defra. He reported that the review was due to be published on 14 May. The Board noted the review and thanked Mark Funnell for his update.

## **7. First 100 days opportunities for a new government**

Mark Funnell introduced Paper 14/15 which highlighted some key events and areas of interest which a new government may want to speak at or promote during its first 100 days. Mark Funnell invited the Board to comment and discuss.

Simon Hodgson suggested that the health benefits of trees to people may be an issue of interest to a new government. He suggested it should be added to the Paper, which the Board agreed.

The Board discussed the ownership of Countryside Stewardship and CAP communications. The conclusion was that the Forestry Commission (and other delivery body) engagement and ownership would be important at the local and customer scale, but that at a higher level the announcements and ownership would be through Defra.

## **8. UK Forestry Standard**

Richard Britton introduced Paper 15/15 on a review of the United Kingdom Forestry Standard (UKFS) and Forestry Commission England's preference for bringing the standard up to date by publishing a new edition.

The Board discussed the benefits and drawbacks of having the UKFS in its current form and the circumstances which might challenge its status.

The Board discussed the Defra smarter guidance policy and the consensus was that its application to UKFS should be handled carefully because of its cross-border nature and added value over and above guidance based on the legal requirements for Forestry. Analysis from stakeholders also seemed to suggest that there would be significant pressure from the private sector to retain the standard in some form.

The Board noted that the forest regulations taskforce, an industry led review, had concluded that the UKFS was a very effective way of referencing appropriate management. Feedback from processors and purchasers was that the requirement for meeting sustainability standards was high and UKFS had been a good way of meeting this demand. Richard Greenhous commented that having the UKFS consolidated into a single document was a much lower burden to government than having to reference each individual requirement when dealing with customers.

The Board asked if more field based research could be done, particularly with smaller owners, to establish if the quantity of guidance was providing a barrier to

bringing woodland into management. Richard Greenhous agreed he would look into the issue.

The Board agreed the recommendations of the Paper but in light of the comments made by the Board and the suggestions for a better understanding of the impact of the UKFS on woodland management.

**ACTION Richard Greenhous to commission Dom Driver to write to Richard Howe with the Board's agreed views on reviewing the UKFS.**

## **9. Refreshed FR project**

Richard Greenhous introduced the Paper on the purpose of a refreshed Forest Research Agency, introducing the discussion points outlined in the Paper.

The Board welcomed the consideration of a refreshed FR Agency as a transition step towards more a stable long term position. The Board discussed the future role of Forest Research and how it might be sustainably set-up to deliver long term, high impact research and how this might be achieved in the context of changes to current Cross-border services, Corporate and Forestry Support and devolved administrations.

The Board thanked Richard Greenhous for his timely update and awaited further updates from the project in future.

## **10. CAP and EU payments update**

Richard Greenhous provided the Board with the most up to date position for implementing the Common Agricultural Policy and how European Union payments would be administered. The most significant of these updates was exploring a secondment option for Forestry Commission England staff to Natural England for the period required to process paper applications while the IT customer functionality was continuing to be developed.

## **11. AOB**

Ian asked the Board to consider future agenda items and issues of discussion for the next England Executive Board meeting and the Senior Managers meeting.

- Sarah England proposed that the Business Strategy Group roadmap should be an item for discussion.
- Richard Greenhous asked if an external speaker could be brought in to give a more external outlook to the meeting, suggesting Gabriel Hemery as an option.
- Mark Funnell asked if a discussion could occur on the new governments manifesto.

**ACTION: Richard Barker to consult on agendas for EEB awayday and Senior Mangers' meeting**

Richard Barker raised the issue of staff with second jobs, outlining a number of instances that had recently come to light, which suggested that the processes and protocols for ensuring propriety were not being followed. He led a discussion on members of Forestry Commission England staff holding second jobs and the

process and protocols for ensuring propriety. Richard Britton expanded on the specific cases. Richard Barker suggested that the guidance in the staff handbook was not sufficiently clear or easy to find and that it was very important to make sure that there was improved awareness of the guidance to be followed for getting approval for second jobs.

**ACTION: Sarah England to consider improvement/re-iteration of staff guidance on second jobs. Mike Seddon to consider how to reinforce messages on this subject with staff in forest districts.**

Richard Greenhous raised a third point of other business. He reported that the programme of work to deliver the science and innovation strategy had been signed off in line with the agreement made previously by the Board. The Board welcomed this news.

**Ian Gambles closed the meeting.**